Ask Jon Eakes

Making panels follow a curve

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Often designers, or your own artistic urges, call for a curve in the riser of a stairway or perhaps a whole wall, and you have to figure out how to get that done.There is a great new invention for making the structure of curves walls. It is like the bottom track of a metal stud wall but it has pivot pins and fixing straps along the two sides. You simply bend it into shape and either screw it to the floor or put some screws into the straps themselves so they lock in your curve. Then put either metal or wood studs in-between a top and bottom plate and you are ready to put a curved panel on the wall. Look for that where they sell steel studs in the renovation stores.As for curving plywood, the trick is to cut slots through all but the last layer of veneer, and make sure that the grain of this last layer runs across the cuts. This usually requires a table saw or a radial arm saw to control the depth of this cut, but at least one sliding mitre saw from Bosch has a depth stop that makes this a breeze for pieces that are not too wide. If you want to strengthen a piece like this after curving it, fill the slots back in with glue and sawdust to give that veneer more backing, useful if it might get kicked a lot like on a stairway riser.If you want to cover the wall with full panels you have two choices. 1/4 inch flexible drywall will work. You will probably want to put on at least two layers for strength. Flexible plywood also exists as you can see in the last two photos. It is relatively thin and when you look closely at the structure, it has gaps in the inner layers much like the slots we cut into the first piece. Those gaps are what allow a surprising flexibility.

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